WASHINGTON POST
AND TIMES HERALD
JAN 2 1 1966

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A Thousand Days—VI

JFK Faced Now-or-Never Choice On Cuba Invasion Early in Term

Details of the first Cuba crisis are related, and President Kennedy showed surprise at America's reaction to the fiasco.

(Sixth of a Series)

By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

No legend is more enduring than the notion that Washington "forced" Cuba into the arms of Moscow. In fact, the revolution was very popular in the United States in the early months of 1959. When Castro visited this country in the spring, his journey had aspects of a triumphal procession. I heard him speak to several thousand students in the Harvard Stadium. Jaunty in his olive-green fatigues, he gave a fluent harangue, memorable chiefly for a disarming ability to make jokes in English.

Even the Eisenhower Administration hoped for a while they could do something with him. Official policy toward Castro, it must be said, had been in a more than usual state of confusion. Eisenhower's first ambassador, Arthur Gardner, was strongly pro-Batista; his successor, Earl E. T. Smith, hoped that Batista would leave quietly; while the State Department was sure that the dictatorship was doomed. Arms deliveries were stopped as early as March, 1958, but the United States military mission remained — a compromise which displeased both sides. When Batista fled the country, Washington gave the revolutionary government prompt recognition. Castro reached Washington in April, and the State Department set up meetings with the economic members of his delegation to discuss an aid program. But Castro had instructed these officials, to their astonishment, not to raise the question of assistance. As early as the spring of 1959, Castro seems to have cast the United States in the role of enemy of the revolution.

Cuba's Reckless Verve

It was true that revolutionary Cuba had a reckless and anarchic verve unknown in any other communist state, that it had abolished corruption, that it was educating and inspiring its people, that it had exuberantly reclaimed a national identity — but these truths blotted out harsher truths and subtler corruptions. The Eisenhower Administration bequeathed the new President a force of Cuban exiles under American training in Guatemala, a committee of Cuban politicians under American control in Florida and a plan to employ the exiles in an invasion of their homeland and to install the committee on Cuban soil as the provisional government of a free Cuba.

On Jan. 22, two days after the Inauguration, Allen Dulles and Gen. Lemnitzer exposed the project to leading members of the new administration, among them Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and Robert Kennedy. Speaking for the Joint Chiefs, Lemnitzer tried to renew discussion of alternatives ranging from minimum to maximum United States involvement. Six days later President Kennedy convened his first White House meeting on the plan. He was wary and reserved in his reaction. After listening for a long time, he instructed the Defense Department to take a hard look at CIA's military conception and the State Department to prepare a program for the isolation and containment of Cuba through the OAS. In the meantime, CIA was to continue what it had been doing. The existing ground rule against overt United States participation was still to prevail.

The pace of events soon began to quicken. In early March the President of Guatemala warned that the presence of the Cubans was a mounting embarrassment and that he must request assurances that they depart by the end of April. For its part, the CIA reported that the Cubans themselves were clamoring to move; the spirit of the Brigade had reached its peak, and further postponement would risk demoralization. And there was another potent reason for going ahead. Castro, the CIA said, was about to receive jet airplanes from the Soviet Union. After June, it would take the United States Marines and Air Force to overthrow Castro. If a purely Cuban invasion were ever to take place, it had to be in the next few weeks. By mid-March the new President was confronted with a now-or-never choice.

The Go-Ahead

Early in April he decided to go ahead. He felt that he had pared the operation down from a grandiose amphibious assault to a mass infiltration. Accepting CIA assurances about the ease of escape from the beachhead to the hills, he supposed that the cost, both military and political, of failure was now reduced to a tolerable level. As the decision presented itself to him, he had to choose whether to disband a group of brave and idealistic Cubans, already trained and equipped, who wanted very much to return to Cuba on their own, or to permit them to go ahead.

More generally, the decision resulted from the fact that he had been in office only 77 days. He had not had the time or opportunity to test the inherited instrumentalities of government. He could not know which of his advisers were competent and which were not. For their part, they did not know him well enough to raise hard questions with force and candor. Moreover, the massed authority of his senior officials in foreign policy and defense was unanimous for going ahead: the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency. "If someone comes in to tell me this or that about the minimum wage bill," Kennedy said to me later, "I have no hesitation in overruling them. But you always assume that the military and intelligence people have some secret skill not available to ordinary mortals."

And so we went ahead. By early Tuesday, April 18, it was clear the invasion was in trouble. Some people were arguing that we had no choice now but to commit American forces. Kennedy disagreed. Defeat, he said, would be an incident, not a disaster. The test had always been whether the Cuban people would back a revolt against Castro. If they wouldn't, the United States could not by invasion impose a new regime on them. But would not United States prestige suffer if we let the rebellion flicker out? "What is prestige?" Kennedy asked. "Is it the shadow of power or the substance of power? We are going to work on the substance of power."

Long Grim Day

It was a long and grim day—the longest and grimmest the New Frontier had known. We could not rid our minds of the thought of brave men, running short of ammunition, without adequate air cover, dying on Cuban beaches before Soviet tanks. Late that night the President walked for a long time alone in the desolate silence of the White House garden.

By Wednesday it was all over. That afternoon I brought the members of the Cuban Revolutionary Council to the President's office. He was never more impressive. The struggle against communism, he said, had many fronts; leadership in that struggle imposed many responsibilities. The United States had to consider the balance of affairs all around the world. He added that he had himself fought in a war, that he had seen brave men die, that he had lost a brother, and that he shared their grief and desperation.

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It was a failure, and he took all the blame himself. "I'm the responsible officer of the government," he told his press conference, adding wrily, "There's an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan."

He was always a bit surprised by the American reaction to the fiasco. If he had been a British prime minister, he privately remarked, he would have been thrown out of office; but in the United States failure had increased his charm: "If I had gone further, they would have liked me even more." At this point, Evelyn Lincoln brought in an advance on the new Gallup poll, showing an unprecedented 82 per cent behind the Administration. Kennedy tossed it aside and said, "It's like Eisenhower. The worse I do, the more popular I get."

Saturday: In the wake of the Bay of Pigs disaster.